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THE
JEWISH COMMUNITY
OF
NEW YORK CITY

BY

J. L. MAGNES

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NEW YORK
1909



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THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF NEW YORK CITY

BY J. L. MAGNES

This meeting has been called as the result of many meetings which had as their aim the formation of a Jewish Community of New York City. When Police Commissioner Bingham made the statement, which he afterwards retracted, that the Jews contribute 50 per cent. of the criminals of New York City, many meetings were held by Jewish organizations and indignant protests were made. Any number of plans for redress were proposed. Many of these plans bordered on the absurd. Some suggested that we march to the City Hall in overwhelming numbers and demand of the Mayor the head of his Police Commissioner. Others proposed that a political organization be formed for the one purpose of supporting that political party which would demand the removal of the Commissioner. Many a speech

An address delivered at the opening of the Constituent Convention of the Jewish Community of New York City on Saturday, February 27, 1909, at the Hebrew Charities Building.

was delivered, and many kinds of conferences in various parts of the city were held. The whole movement of indignation seems to have been crystallized in those conferences held at Clinton Hall on October 11th and 12th, 1908, and now known as the Clinton Hall Conference. The discussion at that Conference was long and earnest and interesting. It was shown that the Jews were capable of righteous indignation and that this indignation might be followed by decisive action on their part. It was the sense of the Clinton Hall Conference that an attempt be made to form a central organization of the Jews of New York City. A Committee of Twenty-five was appointed with authority to consult with other organizations looking to the creation of what might be known as The Jewish Community of New York City. The proceedings of the Clinton Hall Conference were followed with eagerness by large sections of the Jewish population, and the result of its deliberations was hailed with general satisfaction.

The Committee of Twenty-five, after several sessions, found it to be its duty to consult with the American Jewish Committee. The reasons for this determination were these: First, The American Jewish Committee was in existence and had been organized for similar purposes. Second, the Clinton Hall Conference was representative particularly of "downtown"; whereas

the American Jewish Committee, while it contained many "downtown" Jews, also contained a very good representation of the "uptown" Jews. Third, the American Jewish Committee was not only a local organization but also a national organization, with a constituency throughout the United States. Relationship with the American Jewish Committee might therefore give the Jews of New York City some voice in shaping not only local Jewish policies, but also the policy of Jews throughout the land; and, by reason of the international connections of the American Jewish Committee, some voice also in fashioning the policy of international Jewry.

A short sketch of the democratic movement that led to the organization of the American Jewish Committee would now seem to be in place, especially because this Convention is, I think, but the last phase of this democratic movement in Jewry. In the year 1905, as a result of the Russian massacres, two organizations were formed in this country. The one, the Committee for the Relief of Sufferers by Russian Massacres, was effective in raising over a million dollars for the relief of our persecuted brethren in Russia. The other organization, the Jewish Defence Association, succeeded in raising a considerable sum to be used by our brethren in Russia for their own defence. The

Jewish Defence Association began an agitation also on behalf of what was then characterized as an American Jewish Congress. The leaders of the Relief Committee too had begun to feel the necessity of an organization to take the place of individual effort and to relieve the individual of too much responsibility. The prime movers in the creation of an American Jewish Congress accordingly believed it to be their duty to give up their own plan, and to labor for the creation of a general organization. This eventually became the American Jewish Committee.

The American Jewish Committee was constituted in this Hebrew Charities Building. A plan of organization along completely democratic lines was discussed, but after earnest consideration, rejected as, for the present, unfeasible. It has been held by many that the American Jewish Committee does not represent the Jews whom it pretended to represent, because it had no mandate from the people. Those who passed this criticism on the Committee were willing to admit that were a plebiscite to be had, the mass of the Jewish people would approve the selection of perhaps most of the men now constituting the American Jewish Committee. It was granted also by the critics of the Committee that the men constituting that Committee had taken upon them-

selves the burden of its work not for any personal aggrandizement, but because the work had to be done and it seemed there was no organization to do it. Nevertheless, the fact remained that the Committee was self-constituted, and no one was more alive to the justice of this charge than the members of the American Jewish Committee themselves. An attempt was therefore made by the American Jewish Committee to democratize itself by creating large Advisory Councils which were to elect the members of the general Committee.

While the plan of the Advisory Councils was being put into effect, the Bingham incident occurred, the Clinton Hall Conference was held, and the Committee of Twenty-five was appointed. This Committee of Twenty-five and the New York City members of the American Jewish Committee met frequently in conference. The result of their conferences was the call which was signed jointly by the members of the Committee of Twenty-five and the New York members of the American Jewish Committee. And this call has brought you here for the purpose of forming the Jewish Community of New York City.

The question now remains to be answered as to what the Jewish Community of New York City should be organized for. The Jews of New York City have a twofold problem. We

have what might be called our external problem and our internal problem. Our external problem concerns our relationship with the outside community of which we form a part. Not long ago, there was a great uproar about the singing of Christmas songs in the public schools. That is but an instance of the many problems which concern us as a community in our relations with our non-Jewish fellow citizens, and to solve which, it is necessary that there be among the Jews some properly constituted authority. At the present time, however, there is no representative, authoritative, permanent organization that dare speak for the Jewish people. Any individual or any organization can claim to be the spokesman of the Jews and as a result there is confusion worse confounded. If, however, a representative, well-organized community were in existence, the Jews would know whom to regard as their spokesman and the non-Jewish world would know to whom to listen. But for such an organization to possess the authority to deal with external problems, it must receive its mandate from the Jewish people at large.

We have, furthermore, our internal problem. This is, to my mind, the more important, for it concerns the development of our inner life as Jews. Nothing Jewish should be foreign to a Jewish Community of New York City. There

are, for example, hundreds of synagogues of various shades of observance and belief. Whereas the Jewish Community should have no right to interfere with the autonomy of any of these synagogues or of any other organization, it ought to be able to suggest to the orthodox synagogues that they organize themselves into a union for the purpose of furthering the cause of Judaism, and to the reformed synagogues that they form a union for the same purpose. There are also questions of Schechita, of Milah, of marriage and divorce, of the mush-room synagogues that spring up at the time of the high holidays. The Jewish Community should endeavor to have Boards created for the regulation of all such questions and for the proper conduct of all these and similar activities. On these Boards, only such men should sit as have rabbinic authority, and as will be recognized by the mass of the people as possessing such authority. Any difficulties, moreover, that synagogues may encounter, might be brought before the proper Board for adjustment, and when new synagogues are to be established, advice and help in many directions might be secured from the Community.

We have, furthermore, the question of Jewish education. Thousands of dollars and boundless energy and affection are expended each year on the education of the Jewish child, but

it may be said that we have no Jewish educational system. Some schools are good, some are not. What the Community might do is, for example, to help such a movement as is now beginning to develop, that of forming a Board of Jewish Education and of employing a Superintendent of Instruction. This would be instrumental in introducing something like a uniform system into the various Jewish schools of this city, and of improving their teaching methods. It would help to correct many abuses practiced by unlicensed and incompetent private schools and teachers. It would also show the necessity for additional schools for thousands of Jewish children who now are willing to go to a Jewish school but who find no schools to receive them.

We have also charitable and social problems which an effective Community might help to solve. In this building, for instance, the United Hebrew Charities is housed. Each year, this institution complains that it is not supported as it ought to be. It is thus with other worthy institutions. This lack of support is, in some measure, due to the absence of a way to reach the masses of the people themselves. The Jewish masses are perhaps the most charitable of people. Their many independent benevolent societies might be induced by the Community to form a union of benevolent societies. Fur-

thermore, if the Community is really representative of the whole people it could reach the people on behalf of a worthy cause more quickly than any other agency might. Perhaps, also, we may eventually devise some means of collecting a per capita tax from the whole Jewish population, in order to meet the needs of our charitable organizations. It may, also, be possible to create sentiment in favor of the creation of an Employment Bureau, a Committee on Conciliation between employer and employee, and other such agencies. This beautiful building, moreover, or some other such building, might be made into a Beth Am, the Jewish Communal House, and here Jewish communal activities might find a center. Communal organizations might have their offices here and this auditorium might be used for occasions of interest to the Community or its constituent parts.

All of this is dependent upon the creation of a Jewish public opinion. There is no such thing at present, and a central organization like that of the Jewish Community of New York City is necessary to create a Jewish public opinion. Here the various tendencies within New York Judaism may find a meeting ground and an organ through which to express themselves. And it may be that by means of a Jewish public opinion, Jewish institutions will

adopt a policy in conformity with the expressed wishes of the Community.

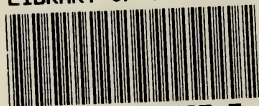
Much of this work has as its pre-requisite the gathering of Jewish statistics. Who are we and what are we? How many and of what nature are our synagogues, our schools, our charitable institutions, our lodges and our societies? Who are our criminals, what our communal needs? We seem to be a community of over a million souls, the largest Jewish community in the world, but we are hardly cognizant of what we possess or what we require.

If we organize this Community together with the American Jewish Committee, we shall be able so to influence the American Jewish Committee as to make it entirely democratic. Communities similar to ours will be formed in Chicago, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Boston, Cleveland and other large cities. Then, not only the local Community but the national organization of which it is a part will be democratic, representative, authoritative. As a result, as I said before, each local Community will have a voice in shaping not alone its own policy but that also of Jewry and Judaism throughout the land, and perhaps, throughout the world.

But one word more. If we organize the Jewish Community of New York City, it will in some measure, be a realization of the words we are inclined so often to use: Chaverim Kol

Yisroel, All Israel are brothers. It will wipe out invidious distinctions between East European and West European, foreigner and native, "uptown" Jew and "downtown" Jew, rich and poor, and it will make us realize that the Jews are one people with a common history and with common hopes.

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